

The Minister and the Hymn Book

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TOGETHER with all those whose traditions are with the Reformed Churches of the strictly Calvinistic type, I share a handicap in discussing the subject of the minister and the hymn book. The hymn book has had a very hard time at the hands of the strictly Calvinistic ministers. It has come slowly and painfully to the place of universal pre-eminence it now holds among them. An arrested development covering at least 150 years greatly hindered the growth of the hymn particularly in the Presbyterian churches. It was not till after the close of the 18th century, in fact well on into the 19th, that Presbyterian bodies earnestly undertook to Christianize their song and to enjoy poetic freedom, thus escaping many restrictions on worship imposed by rigid Calvinistic definitions of a worthy vehicle for divine praise.

In this highly conversant group of hymn lovers one need not follow his inclinations at this point and make what are most interesting distinctions between Luther's conception of the place of the hymn, choral and melodic tune in the worship of the people and the ideas of John Calvin and the still more restricted ideas of Zwingli on the subject. These distinctions are sharp, persistent and historically significant. Luther justified his use of popular tunes by saying, "We have undressed these idolatrous, lifeless, crazy words, stripping off the noble music and putting it upon the living and holy Word of God." So he did! "Innsbruck" was a parting song of journeymen apprentices. So abundant and meritorious were these airs of the folk songs that Bach made a collection for his household enjoyment of more than 250. But John Calvin was too familiar with the trivial ballads and ditties of degenerate France ever to think of their emotionalizing power in connection with sacred uses. And the ways of these two worship leaders parted. Enough to say that Luther with his keen, penetrating understanding of the people, his own love of, and rare gifts in music, and his less bitter hatred of Roman

Catholic formularies in worship, had his Protestant followers singing hymns for 200 years before Calvin's people turned from their exclusive use of metrical psalms to hymn forms. In order to explain, not extenuate, this slow and tedious process of detachment on the part of these Presbyterian churches from an exclusive psalmody, a brief statement is in order.

It was a courageous pioneer that would dare to break with psalmody after its long regime! The Sternhold and Hopkins "Old Version" was issued in 1562. In 1646 the Westminster Assembly adopted the version of Francis Rous, a Presbyterian lawyer provost of Eton and a member of Cromwell's council. The new version of the psalms was issued in 1696 by Tate, poet-laureate of William III, with his collaborator, Brady, a court chaplain. Dr. Julian estimates that a total of 326 separate publications of versions of the psalms followed within the century. Psalm singing took possession of England, court and people. Crowds sang psalms in St. Paul's Churchyard. Milton said half the nurse maids of England were singing psalms for lullabies. Shakespeare reflects the wide currency of the psalm in his day when in *Merry Wives of Windsor* (II, 1) Mrs. Ford, speaking of a letter she has received from Falstaff, says, "I would have sworn his disposition would have gone to the truth of his words; but they do no more adhere and keep place together than the Hundredth Psalm to the tune of 'Green Sleeves'" (a contemporary for "Sidewalks of New York"). A vogue of sanctity lay upon the psalm versions of our Pilgrim Fathers who went ashore with Ainsworth's translation made for the refugees in Holland. Longfellow is historically correct when he speaks of Priscilla having open before her "the well worn psalm-book of Ainsworth." *The Bay Psalm Book* of 1640, the first book printed in America, passed through seventy editions and held a high place in the American churches till the Revolutionary War. With all this in mind, we may judge some-

what fairly of the firm hold upon the singing public in the British Isles and in America of these metrical psalms that were the enemy of the hymns. Not till the religious climate changed did the psalm singers begin to appreciate what old George Withers (1623), Richard Baxter, John Mason, Bishop Thomas Ken and others were doing to set them free from the Hebraic limitations in corporate singing. The dying zeal of Puritanism along with the challenge to faith by rampant Deism and Rationalism and the hunger of the starving people for beauty and intellectual satisfaction in their worship gave Isaac Watts and modern hymnody its providential opportunity. From that day forward the hymn has increasingly found its place in the worship experience of the people.

I must pause to observe that after two hundred years the Protestant Church is realizing more regretfully than ever the irreparable loss to her spiritual life through the destructive measures of the English Reformation. This is particularly true as it affected rich forms of worship and that previous deposit of glorious music from men who at the height of the storm stood preeminent in the realm of sacred music. In the uncontrolled frenzy of these old reformers "the baby went out with the bath." The hundreds of altars, chancels, organs, libraries of music and worship materials that were destroyed robbed the Protestant Church of a rich deposit of noble music to which Palestrina and Tallis and Tye and Byrd and Marbecke and Farrant and Shakespeare's friend, Thomas Morley, along with scores of other pre-reformation church musicians had contributed. We now are seeing, thanks to Dr. Dickinson, Professor Davidson, Dr. Boyd and others, a gradual restoration of many of these lost treasures. (Let us not be too hard on these brave seekers after truth. Popular opinion battling against flagrant wrongs always develops warped judgments incapable of making fine distinctions. It seems dreadful to us that to these good men the only defense of pure spirituality in worship was a hellish hate that brooked no vestige of that from which they felt all their ecclesiastical sorrows and privations had come.) But finally when Watts rose up and dared to make David sing (as the psalm singers charged) "like a Christian gentleman of the 18th Century" the Church for all time broke with what Addison called the

"metrical monstrosities" and with tunes that Bacon said were "hearse-like airs instead of carols." Free from these crude transliterations that so long had hindered the spontaneity and fervor of worship, and with a progress positively thrilling, the hymn swept forward into a gradually widening favor, till today it belongs to the people as never before in its history.

The question before this group at this time and before this generation of leaders in Protestant worship is, how to develop throughout the Church a well-versed, thoroughly competent and spiritually enthusiastic, hymn-minded type of present-day minister. How can we secure men who intelligently will accept this hard-bought inheritance of hymnody, who will weigh its values, take the measure of its significance to corporate worship and who will achieve a proficiency in administering it in the orders of worship throughout the congregations of this period. This is our problem. Of this let me speak definitely. In so doing I recognize we pass to the realm of speculation and theory and rush in confidently with our dogmatics where the angels fear to tread.

In the first place we must wake up and develop in every minister a personal appreciation of musical values, so that hymns and hymn singing will be for him a genuine joy-giving personal pleasure. This necessarily includes many things that will not enter this discussion! This is a basic requisite to hymn leadership. I have in my acquaintance clergymen who are literally nothing short of musical morons. One boasted that he could only recognize two tunes and indicated that "one was Yankee Doodle, and the other wasn't." Such men, bereft of any kind of capacity for personal enjoyment of music, will never come to any understanding of hymn singing, let alone leadership in their congregations. Hymn singing will never take on great significance for them. To such men the sermon is the supreme and pre-occupying feature in the landscape of pulpit and chancel.

I am not talking of a technical understanding of music, valuable as it is to the larger effectiveness of the minister. I am talking now of the necessity of a minister's having a capacity for a pleasurable response from his own heart to hymn singing as a necessary requisite for his leadership in the use of hymns in worship. Dr. Nathanael J. Burton made an interesting confession on this

subject in his *Yale Lectures on Preaching*, delivered in 1884. He describes the thing I mean. He said, "The majority of those who have a heart for music and receive imperative and clear impressions from it are not themselves musicians. They understand neither the terms nor the grammar of the art...I am one of the ignoramuses in question. And yet there is no sort or form of utterance or noise-making which works on me approximately as music does. I listen to it always when I can. I follow it about. I surrender my emotions to it. I never was in a state of rage that could not be utterly put down and made ashamed by music...Never yet was I in any seven-by-nine confinement in the finite and there chafed, but that music infallibly tolled me off into the amplitude of the infinite where I could really get my breath and could mysteriously take on an imputation of its magnitude and have some sense of possessing magnitude myself." He had the feeling to which I am referring. Our ministers may be ignorant of the technical aspects, but certainly they must be able to respond with joy and delight to the appeal that good music in our hymns makes to the feelings. How this best is to be done may well be a theme for our discussion. I think I would not be far wrong were I to say that this desideratum would be achieved pretty much through the method by which my mother cultivated in me a love of tomatoes, viz. by putting them before me not only early and often, but bountifully and beautifully.

In the second place; if we are to call ministers to a larger efficiency in the use of hymns, every minister for the quickening of his personal interest must be in possession of such a quantity of interpretive, historical and appreciative materials as will set every hymn against a background of authentic personality and interesting data out of which it came. The human aspects of the hymn and tune are to many of our ministers as remote as the human features connected with the origin and execution of the Rosetta Stone. The old hymns through the years have routinized their measures into brain tracks worn deep by mechanical repetitions and thoughtless usage. The hymns may be dealt with somewhat reverently by these ministers, but much as a janitor in the museum handles mummies, with no particular understanding of what lies beneath the ancient wrappings, so thrilling in its dramatic relations to world

situations and so capable of stimulating the imagination. Dr. Moffatt and Canon Percy Dearmer have made a great contribution to the equipping of our ministers for their task of making inspiring use of hymns in corporate worship by the splendid handbooks they have issued from the Oxford Press. Dr. Moffatt and his collaborators have treated in scholarly fashion and with fine biographical, as well as musical, understanding the hymns in the *Church Hymnary*. His introductory material is valuable. Canon Dearmer, drawing largely upon Dr. Moffatt, has done the same work in the same way for *Songs of Praise*. Both books include brief summaries of facts in the life-work and spiritual experience of authors and composers with much collateral material that illuminates the whole realm of hymnology in its creative and historic aspects. Every church body owes it to its ministers and choir leaders as well as to the larger spiritual life of its people to provide such handbooks as will enable its worship leaders and worshippers to touch these kindling personalities and vital facts that belong to the spiritual background of the hymns. These interesting facts in the life of these sacred poets and musicians are obscured by time and lost to a heedless world. This understanding of the background of hymnody is a clue to a more competent and stimulating direction of our corporate worship where hymns are involved.

The third requisite that will help to fit our present-day ministers for a more appreciative use of the hymn book lies at a still deeper level than the two already mentioned. This requisite is a recognition by the minister of the fact that his hymn book, which perchance may be to him a commonplace after all, is the most complete encyclopedia available of those mystical experiences that have registered in the souls of men and women through all the ages. The lyric record of these experiences is here and now available for his own soul's need. In these hymns is run the whole gamut of human feelings that rise and move in men when they seek through worship to realize the presence of God. Here is truly a classic anthology of personal devotion that speaks more intimately and understandingly to a minister's heart than anything else he has, excepting his Bible. Too often it lies upon his desk as a mere mechanical accessory to his liturgic program, not the rich overflowing fountain of grace that it

is. The intense and picturesque language of Bernard of Cluny longing for heaven in a world of sin speaks for him amidst the harsh incongruities of this life. The deep intuitive understanding of Christ's Cross and its meaning to his own life, as voiced by Isaac Watts or John Bowring or Faber or How or Robert Bridges, reaches deeply into his soul as he puzzles over the redemptive mysteries of life, joy and spiritual exaltation that touch his darkest day with a radiance and calm his troubled hours with an exquisite serenity and peace, breathe into his life as he sings in his heart with John Oxenham or Dora Greenwell or Paul Gerhardt or Ray Palmer. Never is he so completely crushed beneath the load but that he can find strength to rise again, if he but listen to the call to courage and confidence in old St. Andrew of Crete's "Christian dost thou see them" or Luther's "A mighty fortress is our God" or Bunyan's "He who would valiant be" or, to come to our own day, Dr. Merrill's "Rise up O men of God," or Russell Bowie's "O Holy City seen of John" or Henry van Dyke's "Joyful, joyful we adore Thee, God of glory, God of love." Nothing so saps the enthusiasm of our pastors in their practical use of the hymn book as their tragic failure to appreciate the rich depths of the spiritual experiences it portrays or their indifference to the lyric pathways to God's throne made sacred by the footsteps of these generations of singing pilgrims. To bring this phase of the hymn book to the fuller realization of ministers should be a first consideration, the major objective of those who in college and theological seminary touch these potential candidates for the future leaders of worship. This subject takes on importance today. There is an urgency in the spiritual needs of our people today that should make us all more conscientious and persistent in our efforts to have Protestant leaders of worship meet these and other requisites that condition the larger uses of the hymn in the spiritual enrichment of our people!

Our people are needing at this time two things that hymn singing can produce as nothing else

can. If our people are to find their way up and out of this long mental depression and discover again that spiritual morale by which alone joy, peace and profitable living permanently will return to us, they must have within them a freshened sense of God's reality and a renewed feeling of spiritual oneness and mutual interdependence! Universal hymn singing has always brought these blessings to men in generations of special spiritual need. The Church and the world hitherto have been awakened and lifted from a low state by music and marched forward to singing. Bernard of Clairvaux and his hymnwriting brothers brought hope to the world in the darkness of the middle ages. John Hus and his Bohemian brethren changed the outlook on life for their generation by their hymns in the vernacular. Martin Luther broke the traditions of a thousand years and put a new shining sky over a dismal world when he set Germany to singing "Ein Feste burg ist unser Gott." John Calvin, in urging singing in worship, quoted with approval Plato's saying that "there is scarcely anything in the world so powerful to affect the morals of men as music." While it has been remarked that the only amusement Calvin allowed the people was hymn-singing, it remains true that Geneva was an inspiring singing city whose well-ordered life was a beacon in the darkness of all Europe. Charles Wesley with 6,000 hymns from his pen, and his brother John with his 40,000 sermons, and a program of congregational singing the like of which England never heard, woke a spiritually dead generation, and the Church and the world have never been the same.

The devout hymn singing of men is always accompanied by a great spiritual experience. Those spiritual experiences rise out of a comforting sense of the nearness and reality of God in men's souls always to be realized in worship. This is the thing millions of our American people acutely need here and now! Our ministers, therefore, must by all possible effective means be helped to a leadership in the realm of hymnody that this need may be met.